

## Chapter 3

# Routines That Support Independence

**W**riter's workshop helps facilitate the following practices, which lead to significant student independence. Students:

- Write every single day
- Choose their own topics
- Receive differentiated instruction during writing conferences
- Examine writing to develop a vision of success
- Learn from mentor texts
- Focus on one or two goals at a time
- Benefit from the rewards of authentic audience
- Revise

If possible, provide a writing mini-lesson, writing time, and author's chair every day. In my first-grade classroom, I had a twenty-minute morning meeting (when I conducted a mini-lesson), twenty-five minutes for writing time, and fifteen minutes for author's chair. (Author's chair can be moved to a separate time if needed.) However, you can have a successful writer's workshop beginning with 10-10-10;

that is, a ten-minute mini-lesson, followed by ten minutes of writing time and then ten minutes of author's chair. I guarantee that once your class is successfully engaged in writer's workshop, you will insist on finding more time in your day for writing. And you'll know you've truly arrived when you gain an unexpected free moment and the kids shout, "Can we write?"

## Mini-Lessons

"Mini-lesson" is one of those terms that has been in the educational vernacular long enough for us to feel it needs no explanation. But like most labels, it has begun to take on different meanings for different styles of teaching. So let me take a moment to explain what I mean when I talk of mini-lessons.

A mini-lesson is a focus lesson in which students are engaged in examining one quality of exemplary writing. Unlike traditional lessons, students are seldom asked to return to their seats and fill in a worksheet or complete an exercise that applies the lesson in isolation. (And we don't hear, "I'm done!" seven minutes later.) Instead, students return to their work in progress (or start a new piece if they don't have a work in progress) and try to apply what they've learned in the mini-lesson about good writing. Later, during conferences and author's chair, I will reinforce their attempts. I may even ask a student or two who have been particularly successful in applying a concept to teach the mini-lesson with me the next day.

Instead of thinking of lessons as a way to check off a curriculum requirement, know that each day you are planting seeds—seeds that will grow into a lifelong understanding of quality writing. Instead of mentioning a skill once, or for one week, you will return to these same concepts when appropriate throughout the year. In fact, your students will begin to take the lead in pointing out fine writing in all sorts of documents and especially in books you read aloud.

Every school has its own requirements and its own scheduling challenges, but I will share what works for me and for the many teachers I've been fortunate to collaborate with over the years.

My mini-lessons are part of my morning meeting, and like most morning meetings, mine follow the same predictable pattern. What may set my morning meetings apart from most is that I push up calendar and the math/counting activities that accompany the changing of

## Chapter 3: Routines That Support Independence

### *Discussion Questions*

- Examine the list of writer's workshop practices on page 27 and discuss how each supports student independence. Which of these routines do you currently have in place? Which would you like to introduce or increase?
- Have you tried implementing writer's workshop in the past? Was it successful? Why or why not? Would you consider reintroducing some of the components of writer's workshop? If so, what would you do differently?
- Do you write during Quiet Ten? Why or why not? Why is it so important that we write alongside our students?
- Have you used mentor texts to model craft? If so, have you seen any connections between the models and your students' understanding of what makes fine writing? Which are your favorite mentor texts?
- Instead of providing students with topics, Jennifer suggests presenting mini-lessons that help students develop strategies for coming up with their own topics. Do you agree with this approach? What are your favorite lessons for helping students to discover their own topics?
- What portion of your writing time do students spend actually writing? Are you pleased with this ratio? If not, how could you increase the amount of time your students spend writing?
- Do you currently conference with students during writing time? Do you stay in one place or move around the room? What are the pros and cons to each approach? Are there ways in which you would like to make your writing conferences more effective?
- Were there any concepts presented in Chapter 3 that raise further questions or require clarification?

### *Group Activity*

Write for ten minutes on a topic of your choice. (You might present the mini-lesson "Idea Map," on pages 64–65, before writing.) Then divide into pairs and conduct writing conferences using three of the procedures presented in this chapter: reflect, point, and question. What did you discover while trying this format?

### *Before the Next Meeting*

- Choose one of the practices on page 27 and make it your goal. Make a list of the small steps that must occur before this goal can be met. Tackle as many of those small steps as possible on your way to establishing this practice.
- Choose a favorite picture book to bring to the next meeting.

the date to an afternoon meeting that occurs immediately after lunch. In other words, my morning is all about literacy (which integrates my social studies themes), and my afternoons are devoted to math and science. So how is my meeting organized?

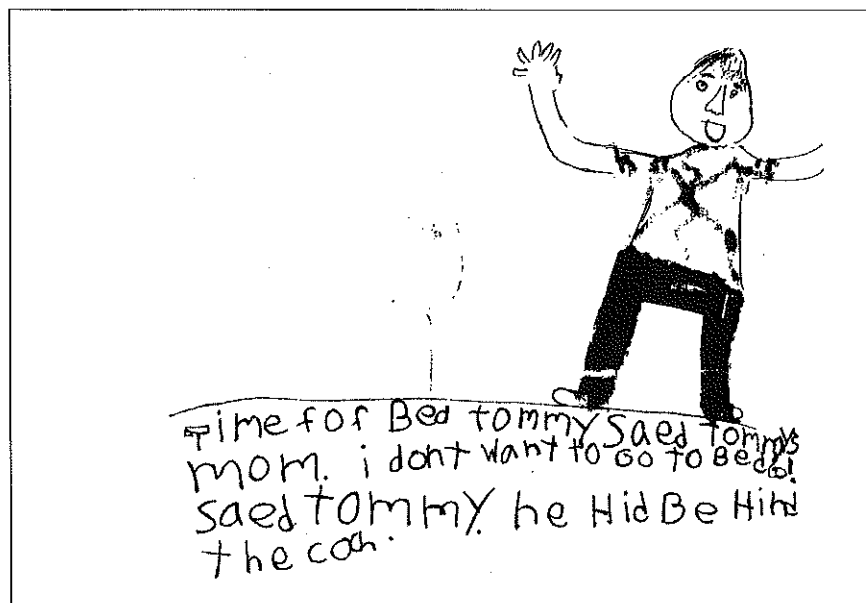
I begin with a morning message. This is where I focus on conventions: phonics, capital letters, sentence structure, punctuation. Each day I ask, "What can you tell me about the print in this message?" Students take turns providing observations (which I circle or underline) and I, of course, gently guide them to the convention I most wanted to focus on that day. My messages are frequently stacked with digraphs, high-frequency words, question marks—whatever I think we need to take a closer look at next. The choices I make are directed by the students' readiness and an understanding of how young children come to understand print. (If you want to try teaching conventions in this manner but do not yet feel confident in sequencing phonemic elements, you might use a spelling textbook to help you determine which phoneme to focus on next.)

After morning message, I read a picture book—cover to cover without stopping—every day. Reading aloud is essential in every grade, but especially in the primary classroom. Not only do we need to provide students experience with texts, model reading strategies, and introduce new vocabulary, most of the qualities of fine writing—voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and (perhaps most surprisingly) organization—are best developed through reading aloud. Quite simply, the more you read to your students, the better writers they will become (see Figure 3.1).

I allow the first reading to be nothing more than a joyful experience. I want my students to fall into the rhythm of the text, to visualize descriptions and events, to feel the pacing of the story or presentation as the author intended it. The exception might be when I ask students to make predictions or raise questions—strategies that must be modeled before the text has been revealed.

However, I do not randomly choose books to read during this time. The book I select to be read aloud on Monday is the book I will use as a mentor text on Tuesday or later in the week. For my mini-lesson (which immediately follows my read aloud), I pull out the book we've previously read. For example, I might reach for *The Dirty Cowboy* and, as soon as the kids stop cheering, say, "Today I want us to look at the way author Amy Timberlake creates a movie in the mind of her readers." Why do the students cheer? Not only because *The*

**Figure 3.1**  
Writing fluency  
results from  
listening to  
literature.



*Dirty Cowboy* is a lively, humorous story, but also because, having now experienced the fun of this story together, it is, quite frankly, *theirs*. The connection they've established with this work—a sense of ownership you might say—creates a predisposition to feel positively toward and engage in the mini-lesson.

What I think often gets in our way of creating mini-lessons with confidence early on is a genuine understanding of and ability to articulate what makes good writing—beyond conventions. Sure, we can discuss the need for capital letters and periods with absolute authority, but voice or quality details . . . oh, that seems so much harder.

In this book, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5, I share many of my favorite mini-lessons for helping primary students grow into strong, independent writers. You will no doubt find many other mini-lessons presented in writing guides and online. But keep this in mind: mini-lessons should have the tone of inquiry. Imagine you and your students are explorers of writing, and you won't go wrong. Don't have a mini-lesson for tomorrow? Go ahead and raise a question:

How do authors begin or end their stories?

How did the author organize this book?

How do authors make us want to turn the page?

In this story, what words jump off the page?

Why do you think the author chose this topic?

What do you think this author cares about?

Does this story make you think of one of your own?

And then see what you discover.

In her book *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K-3*, Lori Jamison Rog (2007) provides a wonderful format for exploratory focus lessons. She creates a three-column chart and at the top writes: "Notice It, Name It, Try It." Students point out techniques or patterns they notice in the mentor text, they give the technique a name of their own invention, and then, as a group, they try to imitate the technique. Using the *The Night Is Singing* by Jacqueline Davies, students might notice that Davies asks questions in her poetry: "Sleep? Mama's feet?" They might name these "Quick Questions" and then try their own: "Hungry? Whose house?"

After the end of the mini-lesson, I'll often ask, "What are you working on today?" As students report, "I'm going to begin a how-to on skateboarding" or "I'm going to keep writing my story about the runaway truck," I send them off to the writing center to gather folders, additional paper, and any other materials they need.

## Fostering Independence in the Selection of Writing Topics

Perhaps you're feeling skeptical at this moment. Perhaps at the end of a mini-lesson you've said to your students, "Today you may write about anything you wish," only to be faced with a class of bewildered, nonwriting students, protesting that they have no idea what to write about. Perhaps this experience has even led you to believe that your particular students simply don't have the experiences to draw from like primary kids in more affluent areas.

I will admit that students who spend an inordinate amount of time in front of television or playing computer games do present a particular problem. Their experiences are often of a virtual nature. (These are the same students who will have less success with prompts.) However, all children—no matter where they live or what their background—get the same 365 days a year. That's a lot of experiences.

I was teaching in a school in Lewiston, Maine, and a first-grade student wrote about the fence next to her apartment building. She

explained that the police catch bad guys at the fence. Her neighbors blamed her daddy; they thought he was calling the police. But her daddy didn't need to call—the police just *knew* to catch bad guys there. Personally, I'd rather read a piece like this than one hundred personal narratives about trips to Disney World.

If you've been providing your students with prompts each day, then they are likely to have difficulty with choice at first. This is because choosing topics is a practice (and all the more reason for offering choice). In other words, the more we do it, the better at it we become. Throughout the year, I provide mini-lessons that give students new strategies for finding topics. Several of these mini-lessons are provided in the next chapter.

Does that mean that my students never feel stymied when it comes to finding an idea? No, writers do experience the occasional block. Often this simply requires a little time to think.

*Thinking.* Now that's something we have difficulty allowing in classrooms. Time after time I observe this scene. Students have gone to their desks. Josh is staring off into space. The teacher approaches and asks him what he's going to write about today. When he says he doesn't know yet, she provides him a prompt: Write about your favorite holiday. He's a bit sad because he had been hoping to come up with his own idea, and now he has to write about a holiday. And because he's seven, he worries about which holiday is *really* his favorite (seven-year-olds take words like *favorite* and *best* very seriously). Again he's left thinking. Now the teacher is annoyed, "Get going, Josh," she says, "or you'll have to stay in for recess."

Because school days have been compressed, because there is so little time to accomplish the long list of requirements, teachers want to see those pencils moving! But one of the very best forms of prewriting is *thinking*. I hate the question, "How long did it take you to write that book?" because I can't give an accurate answer. My latest middle-grade novel only took me six months to write, but that's because I'd been thinking about the story for the past ten years. And there are still rounds of revisions in its future. Our students can't take ten years to think, or even an entire writing period, but certainly we can give them the first ten minutes or so.

I was talking about this conundrum in a seminar recently when a parent came up to tell me her son's story. Her second grader was wondering what to write when his teacher approached him. They had the usual exchange, which resulted in the teacher saying, "I don't care if

**Figure 3.2**  
A Second  
Grader's Piece  
About "Nothing"

Christopher #12 2/2/04  
Sometimes when you don't have  
anything to do you just do  
nothing. nothing nothing  
nothing. A really good place  
to do nothing is when you  
are in the car because besides  
looking out the window there  
is nothing to do. Another good  
place to do nothing is in the  
doctors office because unless  
you want to read magazines  
that are three years old you  
do not have anything to do.  
but you can never really be  
doing nothing because you are  
thinking so you are still doing  
something

you write about nothing, get going." Figure 3.2 shows what that student wrote.

Now, I actually think Figure 3.2 shows a brilliant piece. And in fact, it's a story that contradicts my philosophy. The teacher, in a sense, provided the topic and the child ran with it, producing something wholly unique. But here is the sad ending: The boy was reprimanded for disrespect, and Mom was called into school to discuss the way in which her son had mocked the teacher.

Even the most well-meaning teachers (teachers who wouldn't say, "I don't care" because we do care) can fall into the lengthy, "I don't know what to write about," chat. It usually goes like this:



**Teacher:** What are you going to write about today?

**Student:** (*Shrugs.*)

**Teacher:** What did you do over the weekend?

**Student:** (*Shrugs.*)

**Teacher:** Did you stay at home?

**Student:** We went to Chuck E. Cheese.

**Teacher:** I've never been to Chuck E. Cheese! Would you like to write about that?

**Student:** (*Shakes her head no.*)

You know the trap! The student doesn't mind if this conversation goes on indefinitely, and here are two reasons why: she has your undivided attention and she doesn't have to begin (beginning is often the hard part).

That's not to say, of course, that students don't get stuck from time to time in thinking up topics—we all do. So how can you help?

First of all, refrain from circling around the room. You will be hooked into helping students who may have quite naturally done some thinking and then confidently begun. Instead, remain in your meeting area. Ask the question: "What will you work on today?" and allow those students who have a clear idea to leave the meeting area and get started. Keep those students who are unsure seated on the rug. Now you can have a conversation with this small group, which often leads students to inspiration. However, if a student still hasn't come up with a topic, you might say, "Okay, feel free to stay on the rug until you've

thought of something. I know you can," and head to your table to write, thus shifting the responsibility to the student, where it belongs.

If your students write regularly, if you allow students to choose their topics most of the time, if you conduct daily conferences and author's chair, thinking will happen not just at the beginning of writing time. It will happen throughout the day. For example, a child will invent a game on the playground and think to herself, "That's what I'm going to write about tomorrow." As the day goes on, she'll recall details of the game she plans to include in



Reading aloud books about everyday experiences will often spark student's own stories. Here are some particularly successful titles:

*The Hello, Goodbye Window* by Norton Juster (2005). A child visits her grandparents.

*Pictures from Our Vacation* by Lynne Rae Perkins (2007). Children go on a low-key vacation to a family farm.

*I Lost My Tooth in Africa* by Penda Diakite (2006). A child loses a tooth in Mali.

*Traction Man Is Here!* by Mini Grey (2005). A child receives an action figure in the mail. This story celebrates pretend play.

*The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats (1962). A child goes outside to play in the snow.

her piece—and when she does sit down to write, the piece will be surprisingly well sequenced. Or she will listen to a classmate's story about losing a tooth and think, "Oh, I have a funny loose tooth story. That's what I'm going to write about next!" Before long your students will queue up their stories. They will resist the urge to tell you things that are occurring in their lives, knowing that if they write about them, you will give them your undivided attention during a writing conference.

Occasionally a teacher will object to having students choose their own topics. "After all," she or he will say, "our kids are tested with writing prompts and need to be prepared." I understand the logic, which goes something like this: "Since our students are assessed with prompts, I'll give them a prompt every single day and when they're tested this spring, they will be pros." And it would make good sense, except that it's very hard to find intrinsic motivation to grow as a writer when given a series of arbitrary, inauthentic writing assignments. When students ask, "How many sentences does it have to be?" we know they are not aspiring to do the best writing they can.

Additionally, writing prompts tend to inspire lists. Why? Because they ask students to write on demand. When students have ten minutes to write on a topic they have just been presented with, they tend to brainstorm on the paper, writing everything that comes to mind. As a result, these pieces often lack organization or quality details. Once students are used to "blurting" during writing time, it's hard to break them of this pattern.

And finally, writing often conveys strong voice when there is enthusiasm for one's topic. When students care about what they write, they bring an energy to the writing—and details that convey a unique perspective. A prompt may or may not interest a student, and the quality of writing will reflect this. Imagine, at this moment, being asked to write a personal narrative on your special place. Perhaps you have a special place and you can't wait to share your fond memories. Or perhaps no place comes to mind as being particularly special. If this is the case, the writing of each sentence is going to feel like riding a tricycle through molasses (to paraphrase Orson Welles). Pure drudgery.

The problem with so many prompts is that the adults who thought them up (and I confess that as a freelancer I have written writing prompts) have never tried them. We ask students to write about the first time they did something and then we groan when every single piece begins with "The first time I ever . . ."

So instead, inspire your students to write from the heart day after day *and then* teach them how to apply what they know to writing prompts. Teach them to take a prompt and focus the topic to the personal. For example, if the prompt asks students to write about their favorite holiday, suggest they not write about trick or treating ("On Halloween, we get dressed up and go trick or treating. I get lots of candy. Halloween is fun.") but instead write about the year they dressed up as cuckoo clock and marched in the school parade, or the year they dropped their candy bag but their big brother stopped to help gather the candy up. Remind them to use their skill in using quality details—a skill they've been happy to hone as they wrote about things that really mattered.

What to do with all those story starter kits you purchased for your classroom? Place them in your writing center. When blocked, students can look through them to see if anything sparks their imagination. This is very different than being told what to write every day.

And now that I've gone on about the importance of providing students with choice (and it's essential for independence), I will say that occasionally I do want everyone in my class to try something—a writing exercise, if you will, that will build a specific set of writing muscles. For example, I might ask that students write three different beginnings for a piece—using three different author strategies. Or I might ask that students revisit their work from the day before and circle any action words that could be replaced with more vivid verbs. I call these days "have-to days," though teacher Bobbi Maunsell calls them "must-do days," and I have to admit the writer in me prefers the sound of that. So occasionally I will say something such as, "I know you are all working on pieces you love, but before you return to that work today, I would like you to try . . ." and I will give a brief assignment. Students know that when they've completed my request, they can jump right back into the writing they planned to do.

## Writing Time

Now I've moved from the meeting area to the conference table, and Quiet Ten has begun. I turn on the classical music and write. I know that this is extremely hard to do. You have trained your students to work quietly for ten whole minutes, and the temptation to call in the lunch count or to correct last night's homework is bearing down on

you. Don't give in. Know that writing alongside your students is the very thing that will have the greatest effect on their writing growth. Why? First, you are demonstrating your commitment to writing as an important means of communication. Children have always wanted to emulate the activities of adults (especially the adults they adore) and so will happily write when you're writing. Second, when you write, you gradually shift from being the writing teacher to a writing colleague. If a student approaches you and says, "I don't know how to end this," you find yourself saying, "You know, I have difficulty ending pieces, too. But you know what I did yesterday? I went into the reading corner and read the endings to several picture books and then suddenly I knew what I wanted to do." You are now an insider to the writing process, and your responses to students are not only more authentic, they are more helpful.

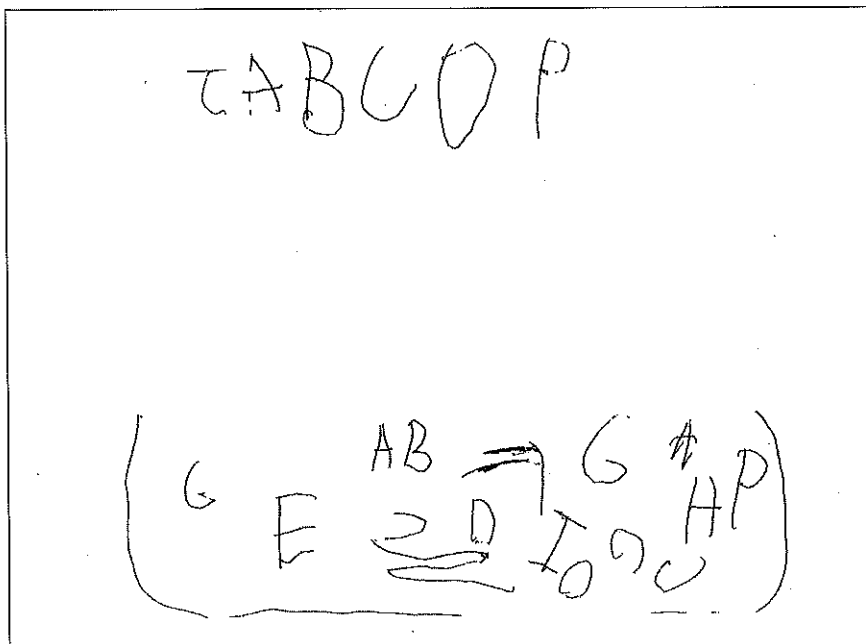
Refrain from talking to students during Quiet Ten. If you do talk, even in whispers, your students will, too. And the music, if heard, will act as a trigger. Let me explain.

Most professional writers will confess to using prewriting rituals. Some light a candle, or utter a sequence of words. Some sharpen number two pencils, peel an orange, or fix themselves a cup of licorice tea. For years, I would turn on a Native American drumming tape. Although this must sound rather "wifty," as a friend of mine would say, the reasons these rituals work can probably be easily explained. Pavlov would call the ritual a conditioned stimulus; the writer's reaction, the conditioned response. Quite simply, our brains respond to a predictable stimulus by giving us a desired behavior: the urge to write.

Jessica DeJongh, then a first- and second-grade multiage teacher, told me a story I enjoy sharing. She was out one day and left her substitute detailed instructions. At the onset of writing time, the substitute teacher turned on Pachelbel's Canon and watched her charges dive into writing. "Wow!" she thought. The music worked beautifully. That afternoon, after giving the students a math task, she turned the CD on again. The students could not focus: they flitted around the room, talked, and genuinely ignored the math work at hand. The substitute said, "What happened? You were so good this morning!" And the students responded: "We feel like writing!"

Because I want the music to act as a trigger, I don't play it throughout writing time. I turn it off after ten minutes and allow the murmur of collaboration to occur. Most students, now deeply engaged in their work, will go right on writing. But a few will be ready to read their

Figure 3.3  
Alphabet Soup



work to a friend or ask for some help recalling a detail, coming up with what happens next, or finding the just-right word. One student will read her work to the publishing volunteer, and I will begin conferencing.

During Quiet Ten, many students draw. I highly recommend this form of prewriting. On the first day of school, if we ask our young students to write, they will give us the symbols they know (or scribbles that look like those symbols). They will write their names, the names of their family members and pets, and any other conventionally spelled words they've practiced. Or, they might simply show off the letters they can write, as Jacob did, telling me that he had written, "alphabet soup" (Figure 3.3).

Too often we want to hothouse them into writing recognizable sentences, so we model what I call "fill in the blank sentences":

*I like \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I can \_\_\_\_\_.*

This is unnecessary, and it actually backs students up.

Because young children believe that "writing" means wielding a crayon or a pencil, they come to school believing they are writers. For them, drawing and writing are part of the same communication. If you

allow your primary students to draw first, they will often provide a complete narrative within the illustration, one with fabulous details. When they move to writing about their picture, the sentences are richer, more sophisticated. And the writing process has true meaning for them.

Based on the work of Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe (*Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers*, 2008), Kelsey Frost created three stations in her kindergarten classroom: one where classmates go to talk through their stories, another where students draw their ideas, and the tables where students write. At first Kelsey admits that she feared her students would not move through the stations but would spend most of their time talking (which for kindergarten students could lead them off-task very quickly) or drawing. Much to her surprise, the stations work beautifully. Her kids move from telling stories orally, to drawing, to writing—and when they reach writing they have gained momentum rather than having lost it. Her writing time has extended, and her kids are immensely engaged and proud of their work. Please note: Kelsey does not require that students pass through all three stations sequentially. Some students decide to begin with drawing; others go straight to writing (where they will often draw as well). Kelsey simply gives credence to all of these processes and she spends time in each station asking questions, guiding students to new insights.

One often-reported problem with having students draw first is that some students spend all of their time drawing and too little time composing. This is a different problem for five- to six-year-olds than it is for students who are six and a half to eight. Let's look at the younger set first.

Kindergarten students and some young first graders need help transitioning from illustration to text. Sometimes it's simply a matter of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. For others who don't know many letters and their sounds, writing seems like an unwelcome struggle. Even kindergarten students who are well aware of the range of abilities in the classroom fear failure. So how do we help these students?

First of all, I approach with a useful question. I used to say, "Tell me about your picture," but have learned over the years that this request does not always prompt a successful response—especially with students who have processing difficulties. So instead I ask, "What is happening in your picture?" Students respond to this question by

telling me a story, and that can give them the confidence to begin recording text.

Many students, however, need more support. For those students, we have a discussion that goes like this:

**Me:** What's happening in your picture?

**Kate:** I went outside and it was raining and I saw a rainbow.

**Me:** Wow! You went outside when it was raining and you saw a rainbow. Would you like to write a word to go with your picture?

**Kate:** (*Shakes her head.*)

**Me:** Okay. But if—if you were going to write a word, Kate—just one word—what would it be?

**Kate:** (*Thinks.*) Rainbow.

**Me:** Rainbow? You'd write *rainbow*! What a good word.

**Kate:** (*Nods and smiles at my unexpected enthusiasm.*)

**Me:** Well, if you were going to write rainbow, where on the page would you put that word?

**Kate:** (*Slowly points to the top of the page.*)

**Me:** Right here? You'd put rainbow here!

**Kate:** (*Nods.*)

**Me:** Let's do it, Kate. Let's write *rainbow* right here.

At this point I'm going to help Kate stretch the word out. If she can hear the r sound but can't recall the letter that makes that sound, I'll teach it to her. I know that students move from hearing initial consonants, to initial and final, to initial, median, and final. It will be a while before some students will be able to hear vowel sounds. That's okay. We only record the sounds they hear. When students take the time to stretch out a word, they are applying their budding knowledge of phonemes—teaching themselves to read! One ten-minute period of writing demands far more application of phonics than multiple workbook pages.

During my mini-lessons, I often model labeling pictures. I also share picture books by Richard Scarry, which give credence to labeling. I invite students to create labeled pictures just like his. Most students will move quite naturally from labeling their pictures to writing sentences.

Spending most of one's time drawing at the end of first grade or in second grade is usually a different problem. The child who can spend all period working on an illustration is, I'm guessing, right-brain

directed. That student knows he or she has a talent for drawing (or a passion at the very least) and is content to spend hours in this activity. So I will often say, feel free to draw during Quiet Ten. When Quiet Ten ends, I would like you to move to writing, but you may return to your drawing tomorrow and every day after that if you wish.

This brings me to a final point about drawing as prewriting. Young students will often draw, then write, return to their drawing to add details, and return to writing to record those details. In other words, when independence is your goal, drawing goes a long way in helping young students remain engaged.

When teaching kindergarten, rather than seating myself at one table, I often move around the room asking students to tell me what is happening in their pictures. As I do so, I help students recognize the letters that make the sounds and encourage them to include the details. What I don't do during this time is spell words for students. (This goes for all grades.) Doing so would transform me from a writing instructor to a human dictionary. When we spell words for them, our students are simply taking dictation. This is not how spelling is learned. Just the opposite. Students best learn to spell by approximating the spelling and then seeing the conventional form.

Even students in primary grades can initially show frustration when I won't spell a word. Chances are they have a very well-meaning parent at home who is more than happy to provide correct spellings. The child has already learned that there is a right and a wrong way and they don't want to be wrong. In this situation, I tell students that when they write the letters that represent the sounds they hear, they are teaching themselves to read, and I don't want to slow that process down for one moment. I tell them that if they have difficulty writing a word that they know is spelled incorrectly, they can, if they wish, circle it or write "sp" above it, and I will assist them with the spelling later. This helps. But what these students really need is to trust that I mean what I say. So I do lots of mini-lessons in which I model "writing the letters that make the sounds we hear." And it is essential that I refrain from commenting on students' beautifully spelled words and instead praise them for all their spelling attempts. Once they realize that I truly couldn't be more pleased when they've recorded the phonemic spelling of *Tyrannosaurus*, for example, they will feel less locked into using only those words they can manage and will give me the full range of their (usually quite developed) oral vocabulary. Telling parents that I want to see their students' glorious



vocabulary also helps some to trust that their children are showing me what they know and that their spelling will develop, over time, into conventional form.

In addition to conducting mini-lessons on labeling pictures and using phonemic spelling, I conduct a lesson on "What to do if you think you're finished with your story," early in the school year. The students and I create a list that will be posted on the wall (but is not needed once writer's workshop has been successfully established). The list usually includes the following:

1. Read your piece to a friend or the class mascot.
2. Read your piece into a "whisper phone" (PVC pipe).
3. Sign up for a conference (and check your work using the editor's checklist).
4. Begin a new piece.
5. Complete a graphic organizer (in the writing center).

Most students end one piece, pull out a new sheet of paper, and start drawing, eager to begin the story they planned on writing next.

## Conferencing

As mentioned in the Chapter 1, one of the biggest challenges of supporting your students' self-direction is giving up control. Many teachers, afraid that students will fall through the cracks, assign conference times to their students. And although this appears to be a practice that would reinforce accountability all around, it actually hinders independence. Why? Scheduled conferences take away spontaneity (meeting when a student most needs to meet), any initiation on the student's part, and the motivation to do well every single day. Think about your habits as a learner. If you are taking a course and you meet with your instructor every Thursday—when do you do your best work? Wednesday night, of course. Scheduling weekly conferences in your classroom will roughly have the same effect. On the other hand, when students are given daily access to their writing teacher, they sign up for a conference when it would be most useful and, therefore, most productive.

That's not to say that you will meet with every child every day. (I tried to have five or six solid conferences a day—with a couple of quickie conferences thrown in.) As mentioned in the Chapter 2, I



Regularly scheduled conference times can get in the way of revision. A student comes on Monday. You suggest she add some details. The following Monday she returns. You'd like to look at the details she added and talk about her ending. She pulls out the piece you discussed last time, but a week later this written work has lost all its energy—and she's lost the drive. She is currently engaged in writing a new piece and the opportunity for timely (motivated) revision is gone.

have a sign-up sheet on my board. When one student erases his or her name from the three slots, another may fill his or her name in. Kids often watch the board and know when to step up to the conference table so the conferences flow. Students need not finish a piece to sign up; they may come up during any part of the writing process, though I find primary students to be rather predictable. They get going on a topic, experience excitement, and want to

share. They may even think they're done, but are always willing (because the topic feels fresh and exciting) to go back and work on it some more.

What happens if a student never signs up for a conference? Using the record-keeping system I described on page 13, I place his or her name on the board myself. Usually once I've signed a student up, he or she (wanting to have more control over his or her time—it's human nature) will write his or her name on the board the following week.

I will admit that when I first began conducting conferences, I frequently felt overwhelmed. Conferences lasted longer than was productive for the student or for his or her classmates and, paradoxically, I never felt that I'd said enough. What I knew for sure was that I was always behind. Eventually I adopted a procedure (first introduced to me by Paula Flemming, a reading and writing specialist from Peterborough, New Hampshire, who adapted the work from Peter Elbow) that allowed me to stay directed and productive. Later, when I began to organize my instruction around six traits, I added sharper focus to my conferences. For some, the procedure I outline here is going to feel too rigid, too constrictive. And I should point out that I remain natural—saying what I feel most compelled as a fellow writer to say in the moment. But learning to keep conferences focused, explicit,

and efficient changed my writing instruction. So perhaps you will look at my procedure and find tips for modifying your own.

Because we view conferences as a limited time to provide one-on-one instruction, we often try to cover way too many skills in a single sitting. We tend to look at the paper in front of us—which reveals all of



Barring injury or fire, students know that they must write a note to interrupt a writing conference. Some students do take the time to record a question or express a need in a note (which provides additional writing practice), while others find another way of meeting their needs.

its flaws—instead of looking at the very young student. Remember: our job in the writing conference is not to correct a paper, but to teach a budding writer! The aim of the conference should not be to impart all of our knowledge, but to share *one thing* that's going to support genuine writing growth. The procedure is as follows:

1. Set goal
2. Reflect
3. Point
4. Question
5. Teach one skill

### ***Set Goal***

I begin a conference by telling the student what we're going to focus on for that day—and in my conferences it's usually a trait. So I might say, "Nathan, we're currently working on ideas, so today I'm going to talk about your focus and quality details." Or I might say, "Yumi, we've been working on voice, so I'm going to point out all of the places where I hear your voice coming through." Setting this goal at the beginning of the conference goes a long way in keeping me on task.

Next, I ask the student to read his or her piece to me. I know that in many cases, it would be far easier and quicker for me to simply read the piece, but I refrain. Not simply to give the student ownership (as my mentor recommended), but to curb my own unfortunate tendencies. Here's the thing. For over twenty years I've known that it's essential when working with *any* writer to respond to what he or she is trying to communicate. In other words, the message should always be honored first. Nevertheless, if I look down at a sheet of writing, my brain becomes a convention detective and notes every missing capital letter, punctuation mark, or misspelling of a frequently used word. Instead of listening to the student's story, I'm focused on the fact that she's still spelling *they* with an *a*, and quite frankly, I'm not hearing a word. I cannot stop this from happening. So instead, I ask students to read their work aloud and that allows me to focus on the content.

### ***Reflect***

After the student finishes reading the piece to me, I reflect what I've heard. If Nicholas writes, "My dog sleeps in my bed and takes up all



One of the very best ways to prompt your students to revise is to model the revision of your own work. Do not, however, keep showing them clean drafts. You want to show them pages of works that demonstrate your thinking: crossed-out words and sentences, arrows, carets, notes in the margins. The more regularly you show them your messy drafts, the more apt they will be to revise all on their own.

the room," I say: "Nicholas, you wrote about your dog that sleeps with you and takes up all the room!" This may, at first glance, seem like a totally unnecessary step. But time and time again I'm reminded of how valuable this technique is. First of all, it is amazingly gratifying to hear your words reflected back at you. You'll notice that most of your students grin from ear to ear as you reflect. Second, many students respond to my reflection by

extending—orally filling in the gaps. For example, Nicholas might say: "Yeah, and my dog is a Saint Bernard so he comes up to here, and he drools, too." To which I will respond, "Nicholas, those are quality details. How can you add them?"

You, the astute teacher, will notice that I did not say, "Would you like to add them?" which frequently prompts the student to say "No, thanks." But that *how* word—now that's one of the best tools in our kit. Nick will offer his best solution: "I could write that here," or "I could add a spider's leg," (see page 46) to which I will nod and say, "Excellent. Off you go." End of conference.

Remember, Nick only needs to be pointed in the direction of one improvement for now. He will come back when he has proudly made his revision, and we will go on from there. This is the power of reflection.

### ***Point***

But what if I had reflected Nick's words and he simply nodded—a sort of "Yup, that's what I wrote." Well then, I just go on to the next step, which is *pointing* to what is working well. Beginning with the positive is not simply a way to buffer the writer for what's coming next (presumably the faults), but a means for helping the writer repeat successes. In fact, I believe that clearly stating what a student has achieved and why is far more useful than identifying all that he or she has yet to learn. The trick is this: we must be very specific. If I simply gush: "Nick, this is wonderful!" he doesn't know why this particular piece is great, he simply knows that he has pleased his teacher. This means that I will probably get a month's worth of stories about his dog. So instead I might say, "You wrote that your dog takes up all the room in your bed. That detail creates a wonderful picture in my mind—a

funny picture. I can see you and your dog; and I can't wait to read more." Hopefully Nick will continue to add concrete, vivid details.

### ***Question***

After I have pointed, I question the reader. Since Nick didn't offer up additional details in our second scenario, when he responded to the reflection with "Yup," I will solicit some details by asking questions such as: "What type of dog do you have? Is he allowed in your bed? Does he go to bed when you go to bed?" Then I will ask, "How could you add those details?"

During this stage, I help the young writer make revisions, not edits. We are not working on conventions, but on the goal we established at the beginning of the conference; in Nick's case, this was adding details. Being able to articulate what makes good writing (beyond grammar, punctuation, and spelling) is essential for this stage. Many teachers have found that familiarity with the first five of the six traits (ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, and word choice) has helped them with knowing how to focus on writing skills.

I often introduce revision techniques to students during the question stage. (Once I have introduced a technique, the student shows it to classmates during the mini-lesson on the following day, so I usually only have to introduce a technique once before it is spreading through the classroom.) I describe some of my favorite approaches in the following sections.

---

---

## **Spider Legs**

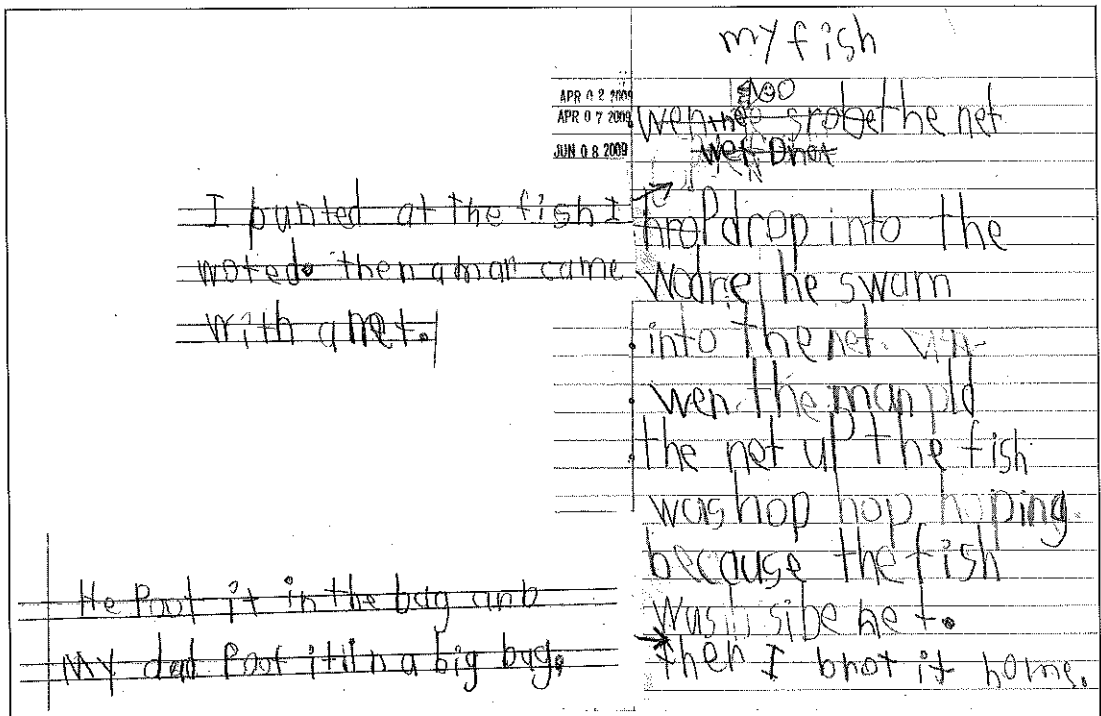
---

---

**Purpose:** To add information or details.

**Directions:** Students write a detail on another sheet of paper (the same size and type of paper they have chosen for their draft). They cut out the detail to create a strip (a leg). Then they tape the leg to their original draft—approximately where the detail would be inserted. Students fold the legs over onto the draft page before filing it in the folder. (See Figure 3.4.)

**Comments:** I love spider legs because rather than simply adding details at the end of what they've already written, writers think about the very best placement for the detail.



**Figure 3.4**  
Spider Legs Aid  
Revision

## Asterisks

**Purpose:** To add information or details.

**Directions:** Students locate the precise point where they wish to add information to their draft and write a numbered asterisk (\*1 at the first place they want to add information, \*2 at the next place, and so on). They then take a separate sheet of paper, write the corresponding numbered asterisks, and write the text to be added. When reading aloud, students go back and forth from their original draft to the page of additions.

**Comments:** Do not, at some point, ask young students to “write a clean draft” incorporating their additions. This back and forth is too difficult and will halt the use of this fabulously useful teaching technique. If the piece is published, a volunteer types the revisions into the final document.

## **Surgery**

---

---

**Purpose:** To reorder information or provide room for important details.

**Directions:** Students cut up their draft in order to change the sequence of the information. Once they have reordered the information, they glue or tape it in the new order on another sheet of paper.

**Comments:** Often students create one long list without any quality details: "Mandy wanted to buy a dog. First she tried a lemonade stand but that didn't work. Next she tried doing chores, but that that didn't work either." In these cases, I tell the student that she has the bones of her story and now needs to add the details. I help her cut the bones up, paste one bone at the top of each sheet of paper, and encourage her to elaborate with details that will provide the reader with a clear picture of what is happening.

---

---

### ***Teach One Skill***

Before the writer leaves the conference, I focus on one (yes, just one) new skill—most often a convention. The skill taught is recorded on the student's checklist (see Figure 2.6) with the assumption that he or she will check work and apply the convention before coming to the next conference.

Why not more than one skill? Because the young student will not retain the teaching, and I am not only wasting his or her time but also depriving the rest of my class of writing instruction time. When observing others' conferences, I often detect a moment when the teacher has gone too far. It's the instant when the pencil has magically moved from the child's hand to the teacher's, and he or she, sensing time is running out, is making marks all over the paper. The student is watching, but the light has gone out.

So when do I focus on necessary conventions? Before a student takes work to publishing, we'll have an editing conference where we focus only on punctuation, grammar, and spelling. In this instance we will work for as long as the student is engaged and learning. Publishing is a time to celebrate success, so I'm careful not to cross that very fragile line from celebration to discouragement. Focusing on too many conventions at once, even during an editing conference, can give the student the counterproductive message that writing has a gazillion rules to remember: "So why bother?" One trick that was passed along

to me by teachers at the Durham Elementary School in Durham, Maine, was to place a dot in the margin before every line that has an error in conventions. I love this idea. When we wield our red pens on our students work and show them where they need to make a change, they make the corrections without thinking hard about what we've taught them. With the dot system, they have to recall what they know. They also strive to have fewer dots placed on their work next time.

## Author's Chair

Each day three children, and only three children, share their work with the whole class. I limit it to three because after three readers, no one gets an audience; other students check out. In fact, if a fourth child gets up to read, chances are even you are not listening. Instead you are using stares and hand gestures to coerce distracted students into paying attention. My second rule: Students may sign up only once a week, which means each child gets to share every week and a half or so.

I use a process during author's chair similar to the one I use during writing conferences, thus reinforcing the language and procedures.

The child, seated in the special author's chair, reads her work, and everyone applauds. Then she asks, "Any pointing?" and classmates comment positively. Initially, of course, many of the "points" sound like this: "I like that you wrote about your dog. I have a dog . . ." But I also raise my hand, and in the primary classroom, I am always called on. I then model pointing by reinforcing the qualities that make good writing. So I might mention something like the following:

- "You chose to write about the first time you ate pudding. What a fine, manageable topic!" (We spend a lot of time talking about topics that are too big.)
- "You wrote: 'When I went underwater, my eyes stung.' That is a lovely detail that allows me to imagine your story."
- "You began your story with a sound. Oooh, did that hook me! I wanted to hear more."
- "When you said, 'God and Jessie made a good team,' I smiled because that sounds just like you, Ian. That's your unique voice coming through."
- "Your sentence, 'My kite flip flapped like a bird,' sounds like a poem. Very fluent!"



Eventually the kids will begin to emulate me when responding to their classmates, especially when I give little nods or sounds of approval as they do so. They become the ones reinforcing the strategies—reinforcing what constitutes good writing each and every day.

Next the author asks, "Any questions?" I know many teachers encourage classmates to offer suggestions, and I think this can also be very productive. But I prefer questions because they allow writers to maintain a greater sense of ownership. Instead of a classmate saying, "You should begin in a more exciting way," he or she says, "Why did you decide to begin your story that way?" This gives the author a chance to think about his or her writing choices and, in the process, discover ways to improve them.

Granted, young writers don't always answer the questions in the most scholarly way. We often hear, "It's what I thought of," and some of our students in the audience get stuck asking the very same question day after day. However, don't despair. The value of questioning is actually more evident during writing time. Picture the young writer beginning a new piece. She starts to write the typical, "One day," and suddenly the voice of her classmate, Joely, comes into her head. Joely *always* asks "Why did you decide to begin your story that way?" So our young writer crosses out "One day" and writes, "Where are you going with that fish?" She's going to call on Joely during author's chair, and she'll have her answer at the ready.

I also model effective questioning during author's chair. In addition, I have sticky notes in hand, and when a student asks a particularly astute question, perhaps a clarifying question or a question about process, I write it down on a sticky note and hand it to the author. This accomplishes two goals. It tells the writer that she or he just heard a question worth paying attention to, and it reinforces the student who asked the perceptive question. Don't write down every question that is asked—only those that have a very specific and positive influence on the piece. As you remember from Mr. Skinner, intermittent reinforcement is the most powerful (1964).

So, you ask, what does author's chair have to do with student independence? Everything. Writers are motivated by audience. A single teacher's response does not make an audience. Students will write for longer periods, use livelier language, include dazzling details, and search for their unique voice when performing for classmates. That's what an author reading is after all: a performance.